THE PERSONAL INTERVIEW

The personal interview is the crucial point in your search for a job. Your ability and training are no longer the only important factors involved; your appearance, your personality, your manner, your speech, and your preparation for the interview assume equal importance. You may have to go through the interview process several times, but each interview will bring you closer to the employment situation that is right for you, and your interviewing techniques will be refined with practice.

An interview is nothing more than a conversation between two people who desire information from one another. It is an opportunity for you and your prospective employer to become acquainted and to match your individual skills and interests to the job you are seeking. It is a two-way process: the employer is looking for the best possible candidate to fill the vacancy; you are looking for the best job to fill your qualifications and needs, and thus, trying to gain insight into the company with the job opening.

It is important for you to put yourself in the right frame of mind before each interview and to keep your self-esteem at a high level during the interview process. In order to feel self-confident, you must firmly believe that you are the best person for the job. You must also convey to the employer that you believe in yourself and that you have valuable skills and talents that will be useful for the job. Bask in the knowledge that personnel people love to hire applicants. Help the interviewer to help you by thinking of every possible thing you might do to benefit the organization. It is normal to experience some nervousness. Being well prepared is your best ally to counteract the nervousness.

Preparation for the Interview

Make sure that you go into each interview situation adequately prepared. Before you go to a job interview, you should do a self-assessment. You should know your resume forward and backward. Be prepared to talk about your interests and qualifications briefly, intelligently, and clearly during the interview. Be able to account for gaps in experience and/or education. Be prepared to mention specific training and/or experience you have that directly relates to the position for which you are applying. Be ready to talk about what you have gained from the experience you indicated on your resume, as well as your achievements. (Examples: As a salesman, I sold the most products of any of the salesmen; as a cashier, I was awarded a certificate of merit for being most accurate; as an honor student, I was awarded a $500 scholarship.) You should also be ready to discuss what you have accomplished outside your work or academic environment, including personal achievements. Be ready to give positive answers regarding your personal strengths and weaknesses.
It is important to research the employer before going to an interview. The more you know about the company, the better able you will be to suggest ways you can be of service to your prospective employer. Be sure you know the name of the company and how long it has been in existence. Be familiar with the products and services it offers and find out who its primary customer/consumers are. Try to discover trends in the employer's history and/or major problems facing the company. Any other relevant information (educational benefits, special needs of the company that you could fill, etc.) is also important.

Practice is a good way to prepare for an interview. Ask a relative, friend, or another staff member to role play an interview with you. Use a tape recorder and listen to the way you speak (watch for too many "urns," "ahs," and "ya knows"). Be aware of the following behaviors:

1. **Posture (sitting and standing):** Do not slouch; stand tall and sit erect. Do not plop into your seat!
2. **Handshake:** Should be firm, but not bone-crushing.
3. **Eye contact:** Look the interviewer in the eye when you greet him/her. Maintain direct eye contact throughout the interview.
4. **Mannerisms:** Watch for nervous habits (tapping your feet, cracking your knuckles) which may be distracting to the interviewer.

When undergoing a series of interviews, try to interview first with the company that least interests you. This will give you a chance to practice your interviewing skills before the more important interviews.

**Dressing for the Interview**

Much has been written on how to dress for an interview. First impressions are important because they become lasting impressions. Your first impression could mean the difference between your getting the job or not getting it. Many times an interviewer's opinion is set as soon as the applicant walks into the room. This is especially true if there are a number of highly qualified applicants being interviewed for the same position.

When going to an interview, *dress in a manner that will present you as an asset, not a liability*. It is imperative to look professional. Anything that draws more attention to what you are wearing than to what you are saying should not be worn to a job interview. Dress conservatively--avoid the current fads. Be neat and clean. See that your clothes fit well and are not wrinkled. Experts suggest dressing as you would expect your prospective supervisor to dress--one or two steps higher than the job for which you are interviewing. Men should wear business suits (preferable in gray or navy blue) with a solid shirt in white or blue. Avoid loud colors and flashy ties with busy patterns. Beards and mustaches should be neatly trimmed. Women should wear conservative dresses or skirted suits. Avoid wearing trendy clothes. Keep jewelry and make-up simple and stay away from pants and pantsuits for an interview.
Do not wear anything too low-cut, too tight, or too short. Nails should be short and manicured. Make-up should be light, and strong perfume or cologne should be avoided. Shoes should be dark and polished. Hair should be neat. The bottom line is: your appearance should not be offensive to anyone. You do not want to be ruled out before you get started.

The Interview

Go to the interview alone. The prospective employer is interested in you; he does not want to hear what your friends or relatives think of you. Bring a copy of your resume with you and arrive at least five or ten minutes ahead of the appointed time. Check your appearance and do last-minute touch-ups before you enter the interview area. The interview starts the minute you enter the company. A receptionist may be asked his/her opinion of you. Present yourself in a straightforward manner. Let the receptionist know who you are and whom you wish to see. During the interview, sit up straight and look alert. Try to be at ease and answer questions in a businesslike manner.

In an interview, you must be viewed as likable. To be considered likable, smile, give a firm handshake, keep eye contact, be a good listener, and demonstrate energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of humor. Without being likable, you may as well not show up for the interview! Be diplomatic and polite. Do not argue, but answer all questions accurately and tactfully.

A job interview has three phases: an icebreaker/opening phase, a fact-seeking phase, and a closing.

The Icebreaker. This phase of the interview usually sets the tone of the interview. The icebreaker serves as a time when some degree of comfort is established between you and the interviewer. The first few minutes are usually devoted to establishing some rapport and opening lines of communication. As you enter the interview:

1. Shake hands firmly.
2. Stand upright and remain standing until you are offered a seat.
3. Maintain good eye contact.
4. Control nervous behaviors (foot tapping, playing with hands, saying "uh").

Fact-seeking. This phase is the meat of the interview. The level of conversation is more specific, with some direct questioning about background and qualifications. This is when the employer obtains necessary information from you concerning your skills, interest, education, and qualifications for the job. It is also your opportunity to elaborate on your resume and to relate your special abilities for the job. This is a good time to describe some extracurricular activities or work experiences that do not appear on your resume. It is also your chance to elaborate on your strong points and to maximize whatever you have to offer. Accentuate the positive. Remember, if it is in the record book, it is fact, not bragging. *Caution: Make sure it is in the record book!* If the words come out of your mouth, you must be able to back them up with concrete examples. Whenever you evaluate or talk about your strengths, try to keep things simple and look at yourself from the employer's point of view. Be sure you communicate your marketable skills to the interviewer.
NEVER criticize past employers!

Be careful not to monopolize the conversation. Let the interviewer control the flow of the interview by taking the lead in questioning. You should control the content by interjecting and adding relevant information about yourself. Some interviewers do not like to do much talking; they expect you to carry the ball. In this case, do not lecture or ramble too much. Watch for non-verbal as well as verbal cues from the interviewer.

The interviewer will usually present some information about the organization. This is your opportunity to ask questions about the company and the job. When the interviewer has identified your skills and interests and can see how you might fit into the organization, you might want to clarify your job objective. Wait on questions about salary. Let the interviewer bring up the subject of money and fringe benefits.

Closing. This is the time to make sure the interviewer knows enough about you to make an accurate assessment of your capabilities. It is also the time to insure that all of your questions have been answered and that the interviewer knows all the things you want him/her to know. This is your time to ask questions. DO SO! The questions you ask serve two purposes: they enhance your candidacy by showing that you have given careful consideration to the position, and they help you stand out from the other candidates by helping the interviewer remember you.

If the interviewer is interested in you, he/she will probably be more specific about the job he/she has in mind for you. Find out the next step: Will there be another interview? When? How soon can you expect to hear from the company? After the interview, say "Thank you," shake hands, and leave promptly. If a request is made for credentials, samples, transcripts, etc., be sure to follow up with these as soon as possible.

During the closing, make sure:

1. You have obtained all the information you need about the job.
2. You have clarified any misunderstandings.
3. You have solicited some feedback from the interviewer regarding his/her understanding of your qualifications. ("Are there any questions you have about my qualifications that may be unclear?")
4. You do not dwell on vacation, salary, or fringe benefits, although you should not hesitate to ask questions if you are really unsure of these areas.
5. You find out the next step in the interview process: when you will be contacted, what is expected of you, etc.
Things to Avoid

Here are some pointers on what to avoid in the interview if you want it to stay on-target.

1. Do not ask for a job—or a chance.
2. Never say "I'll take anything." NEVER. Instead (if you are desperate), say something such as "I've no quarrel with hard work. I can take what might seem to you a lowly job if there is a chance to move up as I prove myself."
3. Do not apologize for a lack of experience. Instead, talk about your trainability and about how quickly you learn.
4. Do not try to do all the talking. Your share of any conversation that involves two people is roughly 50 percent.
5. Do not chew gum or smoke. Even if the interviewer smokes, do not smoke. It is difficult to synchronize your cigarettes.
6. Do not pop into an employment office five minutes before closing time and expect to land a job.
7. Do not tell the interviewer your troubles. He/she is not interested in your personal or family problems unless they will interfere with your job performance.
8. Do not tell a prospective employer about all the turndowns you have had. Pessimism breeds pessimism.
9. Do not wander from the subject at hand, which is how the prospective employer can use your services. When the interviewer strays, just be charming in return.
10. Do not rely too heavily on introductions or letters of recommendation. They only supply the entry.
11. Avoid the What-do-you-have-for-me? approach. You cannot expect a prospective employer to rattle off a list of ways he/she can use your services.
12. Do not kill yourself by "degrees." The but-I'm-a-college-graduate routine is very unappealing.
13. Do not take more than one drink if you have been invited for lunch or dinner. Take that only if your host is having one.
14. Do not hang around after the interview is over. Usually the fact that the interviewer has ceased to ask questions and has thanked you for coming signals the end of the interview.

Questions Most Asked During an Interview

Interviewers understand how costly it is to make hiring mistakes, so they design questions to see if you will give them a reason to disqualify you. It is as if they have a finger on a button to a trap door. If you give a negative answer, they push the button, you fall through the floor, and they bring in the next candidate. An example is the commonly asked interview question, "What is your weakest quality?" If your answer is, "My weakest quality is that I am a procrastinator," buzz, trap door opens, strike three, game over. The best way to respond to this question is to turn it around a little by changing the word "weakness" into "area for improvement." NEVER say anything negative about yourself, your previous company, or
your previous boss. Develop and learn positive responses to tough questions that you anticipate in your situation. Here are a few examples:

Q: What is your weakest quality?
A: Some people say that I am too loyal. Occasionally I am disappointed, but I tend to be faithful.

Q: Why were you fired?
A: We went through a reorganization and the new management brought in its own people.

Q: How do I know you can sell?
A: I am a good communicator and very persuasive. I have surpassed my sales quota every year for the last three years.

Q: Why have you been unemployed for the last two years?
A: I could have accepted several jobs in the last two years, but I am not looking for just any job. I am looking for a position that is a good match and uses many of my strengths.

You can significantly improve your chances of thinking clearly in the interview process if you have already carefully prepared answers to the questions which almost always come up during an interview. Write out answers to these questions and go over the answers until you are clear in both your thoughts and your verbal expression of those thoughts.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. In what type of position are you most interested?
4. Are you looking for a permanent or a temporary job?
5. Why are you looking for a change in employment?
6. Why do you think you would like this particular type of job?
7. Why should we hire you for this job rather than anyone else?
8. What are your special abilities?
9. Do you like routine work?
10. What kind of work interests you?
11. What kind of boss do you prefer?
12. What are your career goals?
13. What are your long-term career objectives?
14. Do you intend to further your education?
15. What jobs have you held? How were they obtained and why did you leave?
16. What jobs have you enjoyed most? Least? Why?
17. What have you learned from some of the jobs you have held?
18. Can you get recommendations from previous employers?
19. What do you know about our company?
20. What interests you about our product or service?
21. Are you willing to go where the company sends you?
22. Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?
23. What would you do if...? (Imagined situations that test a person's knowledge of the job.)
24. What are your ideas on salary?
25. What are your major strengths? Weaknesses?

**If You Don't Get the Job...**

Even though you feel you might not get the job, be cordial and thank the interviewer for his/her time and consideration. By making a good impression, you might be called back in the future. If you do not get the job, DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED. Each interview adds to your chances of landing the next job for which you apply.

There are numerous reasons why candidates are rejected. Some of the most common are:

1. Poor personal appearance.
2. Inability to express himself/herself clearly.
3. Indecisiveness.
4. Lacks maturity.
5. Lying.
6. Shows lack of interest in position.
7. Late for interview.
8. Little or no knowledge about company.
9. Arrogant; cynical.
10. Intolerant and has strong prejudices.
11. Lack of confidence or overly confident.
12. Displays lack of initiative.

**Follow-up**

After the interview, write a brief follow-up letter to thank the interviewer for his/her time and to reinforce your continued interest in the position. A follow-up letter or phone call can make the difference between just another interview and what you really want: a job. This letter should serve one or more of the following purposes:

1. To thank the interviewer for the time and courtesy extended to you.
2. To let the interviewer know you are still interested in the position.
3. To remind the interviewer of the special qualifications you may have for this position.
4. To return the application form that the interviewer may have given you to take home to complete.
5. To provide any additional data requested by the interviewer that you may not have had available at the time of the interview.

6. To inform the employer if you are no longer interested in the position, or if you have decided to take a position elsewhere.

You should keep track of the interviews you attend, perhaps on index cards. On each card, indicate the name of the company, the name of the interviewer, the date and location of the interview, and the position for which you interviewed. Include a brief description of the position, as well as topics that were covered during the interview and information you learned. Finally, indicate when you receive a response from the company concerning your status.

If you do not hear from the potential employer by the stated time, contact them via a letter or phone call inquiring about your status.

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**SAMPLE THANK YOU LETTER**

Your address Date

Name of Interviewer Name of Company Address

Dear

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for meeting with me on (date of interview) to discuss the Personnel Director position which is available in your company.

I thoroughly enjoyed our discussion and was particularly impressed with the way your company's Personnel Department functions. I am still enthusiastic about the position and eagerly await hearing from you in the near future.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,

(Your Signature)

Your Name (typed)